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ABSTRACT

While close analysis of individual composing processes has been the major accomplishment of recent writing research, this research has not yet sufficiently considered how students develop as learners. The work of William Perry, a developmental psychologist, can contribute to an understanding of that development. Based on an analysis of interviews of undergraduates during four years at Harvard University, Perry identified a developmental sequence of student attitudes toward their college experiences beginning with dualism, moving through multiplicity and relativism, and arriving at commitment within relativism. The Perry scheme gives college composition teachers a way to describe their students, to understand what intellectual or cognitive operations they control, and to determine what kind of writing assignments would best serve their social and intellectual development. It also suggests the use of two pedagogical techniques that foster growth rather than inhibit it, expressive writing and collaborative learning. (AEA)

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Teaching With A Purpose:
The Perry Scheme and the Teaching of Writing

Recently, Michael Holzman in "Writing As Technique" (CE, 44, [February, 1982]) remarks and criticizes the current "service" view of freshman writing--that its singular purpose is to provide or confirm the presence of certain basic literacy skills, reading and writing, which both universities and the work place require of individuals. Holzman rejects this basic skills function, arguing that freshman writing must be only the first part of an ongoing process teaching students critical thinking and cultural awareness. Writing should not serve as the handmaiden of pragmatic vocational education. No doubt the basic skills approach--"teaching writing as technique"--works, but to what end? "Teaching writing as a technique is teaching a specific skill, suitable for those who will be filling out forms, producing technical writing, and drafting urban planning proposals, but not in itself quite as suitable for those whom we wish to be broadly educated so as, for instance, to be able to make decisions in novel situations" (p. 32).

That many of our composition programs, for whatever reasons, teach students to write without placing adequate emphasis on the family of skills traditionally associated with writing--critical reading and thinking, analysis, integration and synthesis--is more directly stated by James Tanner. He is angry and at wit's end. Dismayed by recent developments in composition theory, he wonders in "The Ethics of Literacy Training" (CE, 44, [January 1982])

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where among all the trees will he find the forest: "I suspect we are on the verge of achieving the means--be it generative rhetoric or biofeedback or tagmemic heuristics or orthomolecular psychiatry or short-term intervention therapy--to spawn not a generation of illiterates, but a generation of functionally literate, scribally fluent, minimally competent, non-learning-disabled, cognitively decentered, left-hemisphere-dominated, androgenous [SIC] sentence-combiners" p. 23). Aghast, Tanner asks, "Is this what we want" (p. 23).

Both commentators remind us that the teaching of writing--a complex task in itself--is part of an even larger context. The context is a canvas, dense and inscrutable because it is composed of the lives of the hundreds and thousands of men and women who are taking a writing course during any one semester. This larger canvas is my concern. Like Holzman and Tanner I reject those trends in composition studies today--be they cognitive process theory or discourse analysis or whatever--that forget the whole context, the larger canvas, the ultimate purpose and effect of our labor. Like Wordsworth in "The Tables Turned," I reject any science that "mis-shapes the beauteaus forms of things . . . (and) murders to dissect."

Close analysis of individual composing processes--the major accomplishment of recent writing research--provides a methodology for enriching individual processes. It is not necessarily "murder to dissect." Composition research, however, has not yet sufficiently considered the greater context--the larger canvas--of how students develop as learners. Understanding this larger canvas should enrich our efforts to improve specific processes or skills. Such understanding is available through the work of William Perry, a developmental psychologist.

Perry's contribution is a scheme--a model--of the process through which

undergraduates develop, or fail to develop, in their intellectual, moral, and ethical competencies. His scheme is comprehensive and rich in its implications for all college teaching, but especially for the teaching of writing. Our purpose as teachers of writing is to foster growth in our students. This growth should not be limited to their use of language but should also include their intellectual, ethical, and moral capabilities. Our work should, therefore, be informed by a model of growth, like Perry's.

Perry and his colleagues at Harvard College began a study of the development of students at college in the early 1960's. Forms Of Intellectual And Ethical Development In The College Years: A Scheme (NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968) analyzes interviews of undergraduates during their four years at Harvard. The interviews revealed that the primary problem confronting students was adapting to the pluralistic, culturally diverse environment of college. The life lessons previous experience had taught were no longer adequate to deal with the overwhelming diversity of school. Not only were students confronting new and more difficult contents, but also their context had so radically changed that previously successful learning strategies didn't work. Rather than building on a foundation previously built, they had to more or less start from scratch. An assumption here, one that Perry does not specifically address, is that academic skills, especially the basic skills of learning, are not discrete and context-free, but that they function holistically and within a context. Learning is a social phenomenon, and upheavals within the environment seriously inhibit learning. A social view of learning is implicit in many of Perry's conclusions.

As investigators examined the interviews, they discovered " a common sequence of challenges to which each student addressed himself in his own particular way" (p. 8). The interviews revealed "a coherent development in

the forms in which they functioned intellectually, in the forms in which they experienced values, and in the forms in which they construed the world" (p. 8). The complete developmental sequence includes nine distinct positions located within a continuum beginning with dualism, moving next through multiplicity and then relativism, and finally arriving at commitment within relativism. The scheme finds students dealing more and more successfully with pluralism and eventually making commitments and assuming responsibility for working to realize them.

According to Perry's findings, most students arrive at school and weather their first year's studies using "discrete, concrete and absolute categories to understand people, knowledge, and values." These students live with a dualistic view seeing "the world in polar terms of we-right-good vs. other-wrong-bad" (p. 9). Knowledge, the province of authorities, is received, and the student's job is to learn the "truths." These students cannot acknowledge the existence of more than one legitimate point of view towards any issue. In this dualistic stage students cannot justify judgments nor evaluate them by reference to evidence. Theirs is a world of absolutes. Because the absolutes do not originate from the self but are assumed or imposed, they go unsubstantiated. They live in a whole without parts.

Most students break through the dualistic stage to another equally frustrating stage--multiplicity. Within this stage, students see that there are a variety of ways to deal with any given topic or problem. Those whose views contradict their own are no longer considered absolutely wrong as in the dualistic stage. However, while they accept multiple points of view, they are unable to evaluate or justify them. Students even find the process of evaluation specious; the various points of view are valid and need not be evaluated. To have an opinion is everyone's right. While the problem in the

dualistic stage is finding evidence to support what is assumed to be self-evident, the problem in the multiplistic stage is making a generalization. Every assertion, every point of view, is valid. Their democracy is directionless.

The third stage of development finds students living in a world of relativism. Knowledge is relative: right and wrong depend on the context. Approaching the ultimate stage of development, the relativists no longer recognize the individual validity of each idea or action. They examine everything to find its place in the greater framework. While the multiplistic view supports a belief in the randomness, the relativists seek always to put phenomena into larger coherent patterns. Individual viewpoints are put into context and evaluated by their consistence and coherence. Students in this stage view the world analytically. They appreciate authority for its expertise--because it adds power to their generalizations. In addition, students are free to accept or reject authority after evaluating it for its validity. In this stage, however, students resist decision making. They suffer the ambivalence of facing too many acceptable alternatives. Students feel almost overwhelmed by diversity and need means for managing it. There is a surfeit of generalization, and each has adequate evidence supporting it.

In the final stage students manage diversity through individual commitment. Students do not deny relativism. Rather they assert an identity by forming commitments and assuming responsibility for them. In this stage, students assert their particular role in a pluralistic world and match identity and lifestyle to the personal themes and values they amassed through the gathering, evaluating, and selecting process of the earlier stages.

Because he is describing a pilgrimage which has as many separate paths as pilgrims, Perry takes care to emphasize two points. First, the stages are constructs after the fact--they are meaningful primarily as descriptions of

behavior, not as prescriptions. Second, progress through the various stages is not inevitable. Although by the fourth year interview most students function somewhere in the last two stages, some do not. Analyses of those who do not progress reveal three mechanisms students more or less consciously use to prevent progress. These include 1) "temporizing," in which a student, preferring the comfort of a known position, hesitates to take the next step; 2) "escape," in which the student refuses the increased complexity of the next stage by seeking refuge in the last held position; and 3) "retreat," in which a student generally regresses all the way back to dualism, denying all responsibility by placing himself in the safe shadow of authorities.

Since the publication of the scheme, Perry's work has enjoyed considerable attention. His conclusions have been validated impressionistically and experimentally. There has been, however, significant criticism of the scheme. Progress through the scheme occurs at two levels--cognitive and ethical. The stages separate themselves into these levels by the dichotomy of operations within the scheme. The first two stages involve intellectual abilities reflecting ethical development. As a result, the first two stages present the most likely opportunities for intervention.

Although there is value in understanding the Perry Scheme in itself, how specifically should it affect the way we teach writing and what we do in our classrooms? When we teach writing we confront mainly freshmen and sophomores. The Perry Scheme gives us some way to begin describing who these people are. The majority of them are functioning in the dualistic stage and most of the rest in the multiplistic stage. Further, in terms of cognitive abilities, those in the first stage are ruled by absolutes which are not personally validated but assumed whole from some external authority. These writers make assertions without supporting or evaluating them by reference to

evidence. Those functioning in the multiplistic stage are able to entertain a variety of points of view, but they cannot evaluate them. They can provide illustrations and instances, but no controlling generalization. Thus, our teaching should be directed at first helping writers to become aware of their absolutes, then to become aware of the source of the absolutes and the evidence or lack of evidence upon which they are based. In the process of awareness-building, writers should be introduced to the skills involved in defining, and then finding and organizing evidence. In fact, instruction in these processes can serve as the mechanism for building awareness.

Our assignments should require first stage writers to articulate and define their beliefs. Such definition begins with description. Next, writers must determine the origins of their beliefs. These origins would subsequently serve as sources for evidence when evaluation begins. Defining, describing, defending--these are stock terms in freshman writing instruction already. Thus, the Perry Scheme does not alter our instruction as much as it changes our content. Our writers become the content and their writing becomes the text. Our focus must be on developing in writers a sense of personal awareness.

Perry and his colleagues consistently observe one phenomenon preceding growth from one stage to the next--awareness. The transition from the first stage to the second closely follows a student's awareness of the fragile basis of existing belief. This awareness begins with the student's inability to find sufficient evidence to defend belief. Such a failure is a direct consequence of the belief's origin in an absolute view of the world.

Although potentially painful, the awareness gained through the process mentioned above signals a readiness to break through to the second stage. At this point our focus must change. We must teach the grouping and organizing of illustrations into generalizations. Our assignments should now require

writers to take simple generalizations, determine the assumptions upon which they are based, and list details and illustrations that defend the generalization. After mastering this set of operations on generalizations at a safe distance from self--through role-playing or case approach writing, for example--writers must return to their statements of belief and complete the same operations. Now they are evaluating their beliefs. As we require this of our writers we complete the cycle from awareness to analysis to evaluation. Thus we will introduce our writers to the very act of thinking--organizing, ordering, and structuring information and experience into knowledge that will govern or inform subsequent behavior.

The Perry scheme implies an epistemology which views knowledge as a social construct and learning as social interaction. Students in the dualistic stage consistently remark feelings of alienation and isolation. Home and previous environments, the source of their absolutes, have been supplanted by the pluralistic world of college. If learning is a social activity, a student suffering alienation and isolation can hardly learn easliy or well. Thus, in addition to suggesting the sequence of assignments explained above, the Perry Scheme suggests two specific pedagogical techniques growing from recent composition and learning theory. These techniques are expressive writing and collaborative learning.

James Britton and his colleagues introduce the theory of expressive writing in The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (London: Macmillan, 1975, and now available through NCTE). Expressive writing is writing whose primary audience is the writer. It is close to speech and provides a matrix from which transactional and poetic writing may develop (p. 83). For teachers, it provides immediate access to the thought process of students and functions, therefore, as a diagnostic tool for determining where in the Perry Scheme

particular students are and what intellectual operations they can or cannot do.

But its greater relevance is to the writer. A primordial mix where ideas fertilize each other and grow, expressive writing is the writer making connections, trying to discover and structure meaning. Through expressive writing ideas connect, content integrates with identity, and from this synthesis comes the text. It is not writing about feelings but the shaping of ideas for communication to others. Ideally, expressive writing will produce first drafts which, at some safe distance from the self, will be analyzed for the competence of their generalization and the integrity of their evidence. Expressive writing moves ideas out of the self towards others.

In terms of the Perry scheme, expressive writing can be for students functioning in the dualistic stage an opportunity to begin an internal dialog, a dialog considerably less threatening than one involving those hostile strangers in school. Through expressive writing students can begin to discover what absolutes govern their behavior and begin the process of defending and evaluating them. If expressive writing does nothing more than make students aware of their alienation and isolation, it has done its job.

Once the internal dialog has begun and awareness exists, writers are ready to move into the next stage. This brings us to the second pedagogical strategy. Collaborative learning as it has been developed for use in writing instruction by Ken Bruffee in A Short Course in Writing,(second edition [Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1980]) bases itself on a view of knowledge and learning similar to the one implicit in Perry's scheme. The book presents a program in which students learn to write through a structured series of exercises using invention strategies and peer response groups. Students write, talk about their writing, evaluate each other's writing, discover the assumptions--the absolutes or

undefended generalizations within their writing--and eventually defend their writing. Defending their writing, an activity forecasting the commitment of the final stages of the Perry scheme, is signaled through the revision of earlier expressive drafts into finished texts directed at audiences. Through this process students begin to see themselves no longer as strange or isolated. What begins as a cacophony of absolutes evolves into a community of learners. The awareness intially fostered through expressive writing is followed by integration into the community. Internal dialog continues and is augmented by external dialog. Students discover belief, and evaluate and defend it. The process of collaborative learning makes the classroom a model of the larger pluralistic university, but its environment is controlled and, therefore, more supportive. When all works right, this approach to teaching writing moves students into the second half of the Perry scheme and fosters moral and ethical development.

Through the Perry scheme we can begin to describe our students, understand what intellectual or cognitive operations they control, and determine which ones they need instruction in. Moreover, the developmental process therein described encourages us to incorporate pedagogical techniques that foster growth rather than inhibit it. And though we may have students for only a short time and never see the final fruit of our labor, we have begun a process which they can assume responsibility for completing.